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ABSTRACT

Although parents are their children's first and most influential teachers, parents are sometimes absent from the schools' educational process. Based on research stressing the positive connection between parental involvement and student achievement, the DeKalb County School system (Decatur, Georgia) has implemented several strategies to increase parents' participation in their children's education. One such strategy is the educational contract that teams the efforts of students, parents, and teachers to enhance student achievement. The decision to implement the educational contract was an outgrowth of DeKalb's time-on-task study and the system's focus on greater academic achievement. In that study, behaviors interrupting instruction were identified, and conscientious efforts were made to eliminate them. The school also emphasized that time allocated for instruction be used appropriately. Parent involvement was seen as an alternative strategy to a longer school day. Involving parents not only extends study time, but provides modeling by the person most influential in the child's learning. When both parents and teachers convey high expectations, children realize that education is valued in their homes. Ways to solicit parents' help and provide ceremony for the contract-signing process are discussed. Six references and a copy of DeKalb's educational contract are included. (MLH)

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IMPLEMENTING AN EDUCATIONAL CONTRACT

DeKalb County School System
3770 North Decatur Road
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(Enrollment 71,500)

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Although it has long been established that parents are their children's first and most influential teachers, parents are sometimes absent from the schools' educational process. This lack of parent involvement in their children's education is not entirely the fault of the schools. Lareau (1987) found that low SES parents who, lacking educational skills, separated themselves from their children's education. These parents perceived education to be a discrete process, that is, a teacher's job, not a parent's job. Research on effective schools, however, has postulated that parental involvement is related to student achievement (Edmonds, 1979; Purkey and Smith, 1983). Similarly, Armor, Conry-Osegura, Cox, King, Pascal, Pauly, and Zellman (1976) concluded that parent-teacher and parent-principal contact are related to gains in student achievement.

Based upon research findings which indicate that the amount of parental involvement can increase student achievement, the DeKalb County School System has implemented several strategies to increase parent's participation in their children's education. One successful strategy that the school system uses is the Educational Contract (Figure 1) which teams the efforts of students, parents, and teachers to enhance student achievement. In one school where the educational contract is used, the principal reported that completed homework assignments rose from approximately 60% to 93%. Moreover, on teacher-made and standardized tests, significant gains were also noticed.

Rationale

The decision to implement the educational contract was an outgrowth of DeKalb's Time On Task study and the system's focus

FIGURE 1
DEKALB COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM
DEKALB COUNTY, GEORGIA

EDUCATIONAL CONTRACT

We know that learning is effective when there is a combination of effort, interest, and motivation. Because we are all committed to _____'s progress in _____ School, we are going to do our best to promote his/her achievement.

This agreement is a promise to work together. We believe that this agreement can be fulfilled by our team effort. Parents and teachers working together can improve teaching and learning.

As a Student I Agree to:
Work as hard as I can on my school and home assignments.

Attend school every day unless I am sick.

Follow the Code of Student Conduct.

Ask my teacher questions when I don't understand something.

Go to my public or school library at least once a week.

As a Parent I Agree to:
Talk to my child about his/her school activities every day.

Find out how my child is progressing by attending conferences with the teacher whenever needed.

Limit my child's TV viewing and help select worthwhile programs.

Encourage good study habits at home.

Reinforce the Code of Student Conduct.

As a Teacher I Agree to:
Provide motivating and interesting learning experiences in my classroom.

Explain my grading system.

Provide Homework.

Give feedback to the student about his/her progress.

Find out what techniques and materials work best for the student.

Explain the Code of Student Conduct to the student and his/her parents.

Most importantly, we promise to help each other carry out this agreement.

_____	_____	_____
(Student Signature)	(Parent Signature)	(Teacher Signature)

Signed on the _____ day of _____, 19_____ in support of quality education in DeKalb County Schools.

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upon greater student achievement. One hundred items were identified by principals and teachers as distractors from time on task. These items were put in a survey form and administered to all teachers in the DeKalb System. Teachers indicated how often each item (behavior) detracted from time on task. Results were compiled by school, and each school had an opportunity to use the information for strategic planning. Conscientious efforts were made to eliminate items that interrupted instruction.

Not only were efforts focused toward eliminating distractions, the school system emphasized that time allocated for instruction be used for academic instruction. Current research indicates that the more time students devote to a subject, the greater their achievement (Stallings, 1985). Because students only attend school for 6.5 hours per day, 180 days per year, and considering that all of that time is not spent on instruction, the school system wanted to increase time devoted to concentrated, supervised study. A Nation at Risk (1983) recommended a longer school day which was not financially feasible. Consequently, Superintendent Robert R. Freeman decided that an alternate strategy to a longer school day should be found.

Therefore, for the purpose of increasing the time students use in studying, the involvement of parents was logical. Involving parents extends not only the time devoted to studying thus raising the level of student achievement, but provides modeling by persons most influential in the child's learning. When parents along with teachers convey high expectations, children realize that education is valued in their homes.

Soliciting Parent Involvement

The process used to solicit parent involvement is integral to the success of the educational contract. Although the contract is available to all schools, participation is voluntary. We feel that voluntary participation increases commitment from the schools and parents. Usually, the principal with input from parents and teachers makes the decision to use the contract in the school.

Ceremony is also important to the contract process. The principal designates a day that will be used for signing the contracts. Contracts are not sent home to be signed by the parents. Parents are requested to come to the school on "signing day," and school personnel are on extended duty from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. for the convenience of working parents. Usually, a special place such as the media center is set aside for the "signing ceremony". Teachers arrange for parent volunteers or other teachers to cover classes as parents drop in throughout the day. Refreshments are served and the "signing ceremony" is conducted. An area is set aside for the key participants - student, teacher, and parent - to read and sign the Educational Contract.

In addition to the special day and "signing ceremony" some creative approaches have been used in the classroom to help students understand the purpose and significance of the contract. One teacher compared the educational contract to that for buying a car in which an agreement is made to be responsible for the payments. Another teacher framed each

student's contract and prominently displayed it in the classroom. This display reminded students of their agreement to share the responsibility for their education.

Summary

Because DeKalb School System personnel believe that the school alone cannot completely educate the child, the educational contract is one strategy used to gain the support and commitment of parents. The combination of teacher-student-parent is integral for producing higher levels of student achievement. Those persons who are most influential in a student's learning share the responsibility for the education of that student. The use of an educational contract helps parents and students support the educational process. Moreover, this strategy extends the length of the school day by allowing for more time on task, which may lead to increased student achievement.

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